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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR BROWNFIELD, S DECEMBER 13 VISIT TO
BARRANQUILLA

11. (SBU) Summary. The Ambassador visited Barranquilla, capital of Atlantico Department on December 13 for meetings with Governor Carlos Rodado, ranking regional military Commander Colonel Carlos Bueno, and public outreach audiences. Rodado expressed his support for the U.S.-Colombian Trade Promotion Agreement (CTPA) and his presidential aspirations. The Ambassador participated in a baseball clinic with Major League Baseball (MLB) star Edgar Renteria, the inauguration of a housing project, and a tour of the bi-national center, Centro Colombo Americano all receiving extensive media coverage. Embassy delegation found a city enjoying an economic boom fueled partly by capital flight from Venezuela, an IDP population that has stabilized over the last three years, high regard for its outgoing and hope that the next mayor will be better than the incumbent, and a general sense of optimism for the future. End Summary.

ECONOMY EXPANDS AS SECURITY IMPROVES

12. (SBU) Ambassador Brownfield met with Rodado (Conservative Party) who will leave office on December 31. Rodado, who is well-regarded for initiating a wave of investments in the region, expressed his strong support for the CTPA. He stressed that increased U.S. demand for manufactured goods would create tremendous opportunities for his department. In the past year, 110 companies either established or expanded their operations in Barranquilla, generating 16,700 jobs. This includes a large number of Venezuelan companies that fled to Colombia in fear of expropriations. Rodado said that Colombian and Venezuelan business sectors have a robust relationship, dismissing Chavez's threats to cut economic ties with Colombia as unrealistic. Finally, Rodado declared that upon departure he intends to pursue the Presidency of Colombia. He said he feels as prepared as any other potential candidate and noted that Colombia has not had a President from the Caribbean region during the 20th century.

13. (U) Rodado also welcomed the Ambassador to the Barranquilla American Chamber of Commerce, noting the strong historical relationship between Barranquilla and the United States. In his remarks, to the 100 luncheon guests, the Ambassador called the Amcham one of the most important pillars in the U.S.-Colombia relationship. The Ambassador emphasized the USG's commitment to securing approval of the CTPA, and requested the Amcham's support in explaining the benefits to both countries. He further expressed USG interest in broadening the bilateral relationship beyond counternarcotics and security to include deeper economic, education, human rights, humanitarian, and social cooperation. The Ambassador concluded by stressing the

importance of corporate social responsibility programs.

¶4. (SBU) Colonel Carlos Bueno, Commander of Regional Air Command three, gave the Ambassador a one-hour tour of the regional Air Force facilities and briefed the Ambassador on Colombian military operations along the Caribbean coast. Bueno showed the Ambassador the new Brazilian made (with 60 percent U.S. components) A-29 Super Tucano combat aircraft.

OUTREACH AND MEDIA COVERAGE

¶5. (U) Ambassador inaugurated 200 new or refurbished homes for displaced and vulnerable families in the Pinar del Rio barrio of Barranquilla. A USD 280,000 grant from USAID to the local NGO &Opcion Vida8 (Life Option) helped pay for the work that benefited many Afro-Colombian families. The Barranquilla mayors office, through the GOC,s Banco Inmobiliario (Housing Bank) and the Office of the President,s &Accion Social8, also contributed to the initiative. Press coverage was substantial, and the event was carried by most regional media.

¶6. (U) The Ambassador toured the Centro Colombo Americano where he stressed his support for the bi-national center noting that it serves as a nexus for educational and cultural interaction, spoke with 30 English language students, and held a live press conference with local media.

¶7. (U) MLB, the Amcham, and the Renteria Brothers, Baseball academy hosted a baseball clinic for 60 local youth. MLB star Edgar Renteria and the Ambassador threw-out the two opening pitches, and both gave the youth signed baseballs and hats donated by MLB International. The event, which included many parents and media, provided an opportunity to draw the link between U.S. and Colombian North Coast enthusiasm for baseball. Ambassador,s pitch was a 90 mile per hour curve that just caught the outside corner for a called strike. Renteria, whose hit won the 1997 World Series for Florida was grateful that he never had to bat against the Ambassador. Brownfield